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SUBJECT: LIKELY MFA RESHUFFLE WOULD SEND NEW AMBASSADOR TO
WASHINGTON

11. (SBU) Summary: Embassy contacts are suggesting that the MFA's leadership will soon undergo a reshuffle, probably in May. If these reports bear out, three current vice foreign ministers will become ambassadors in Washington, Beijing and Tokyo, and high-level responsibility for the U.S. portfolio at the MFA will change hands. End Summary.

12. (SBU) According to MFA sources, Vice Foreign Minister Le Cong Phung is "likely, though not finally confirmed" to be the next Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States. His nomination process is still underway, but "there's only one nomination for this position," according to one MFA contact. Since March 2004, Phung has been the most senior of the MFA's four vice ministers and oversees the Asia portfolio at the Ministry. In 2000, he headed the delegation that negotiated border issues with China. He served as ambassador to Thailand during 1993-97.

13. (SBU) A third-country embassy colleague who has worked with Phung described him as "reserved, measured and cautious." He is said to speak so softly in meetings that it can be difficult to hear him. His role in the border negotiations with China was cited as an indication that he has the confidence of high-level GVN leadership. Phung's son reportedly began an assignment at the Vietnam Embassy in Washington in 2005, and since that time there has been speculation that Phung would follow. He is known to be a heavy smoker and avid golfer. MFA colleagues respect Phung and have indicated to us that his assignment to Washington is a sign of Hanoi's focus on the bilateral relationship, despite his lack of recent experience in U.S. affairs.

14. (SBU) Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang, who currently covers the Americas portfolio, is expected become the Vietnamese ambassador in Beijing. VFM Bang himself has told us he is resisting the appointment to Beijing (he says he would rather lead Vietnam's expanded UN Mission as the country sits on the UNSC), but the fact he accompanied DPM/FM Pham Gia Khiem on his recent trip to Beijing indicates that he has probably lost that battle.

15. (SBU) VFM Bang's departure raises the question who will replace him as the VFM in charge of U.S. affairs. We have heard from an MFA source that, while again "nothing has been decided definitely," Assistant Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh is in line to take over for VFM Bang. AFM Minh previously ran the MFA's International Organizations Department and is in charge of the various human rights dialogues. At present, he is reportedly already "handling" the U.S. account. He is slated to head the GVN delegation to our April 24 bilateral Human Rights Dialogue in Washington. Our previous contacts with AFM Minh have shown him to be effective and sharp, but also pretty tough.

16. (SBU) According to another MFA source, AFM Minh is also mentioned as having good long-term prospects for the Foreign Minister position. He was the only MFA official included in the new Central Party Committee last April (as an alternate), apart from the Foreign Minister himself, who is a Politburo member. In addition, Minh is the son of former Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, who,

during his tenure (1980-91), reportedly helped lead Vietnam into "Doi Moi." He attended the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy during 1992-93.

¶17. (SBU) In other changes, we have heard that current MFA spokesman Le Dzong will head the Vietnamese Consulate General in San Francisco, VFM Nguyen Phu Binh will be sent as ambassador to Tokyo and AFM Nguyen Trung Thanh will be the new ambassador in Singapore.

¶18. (SBU) Comment: In the past, Phung has performed well in tough assignments. If he is indeed sent to Washington, it would suggest that, far from seeing its bilateral agenda fulfilled, the GVN predicts a lot of work ahead. Post will continue to track the progress of the MFA's personnel changes.

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